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# JW Weekender

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## There goes the neighborhood

Mansfield residents: Rowdy, drunken UConn students taking over single-family areas

By Kym Soper  
 Journal Inquirer

MANSFIELD — Snow blankets the rural landscape now, but residents of this college town know that with the spring melt, students will soon sprout and multiply — red plastic cups in hand — for raucous parties on their formerly quiet cul-de-sacs and dead-end streets.

The University of Connecticut's Storrs campus here has a longstanding reputation as a "party school" in large part for the uncontrolled three-day event at the end of the spring semester that,

in the past, ended with a number of assaults and dozens if not hundreds of arrests.

University officials have since tamed their campus' traditional spring revelry. But members of the Mansfield Neighborhood Preservation Group say that such rowdiness has moved from the campus quads into their residential neighborhoods as students have rented what once were owner-occupied, single-family homes. And the bingeing, they add, occurs all through the school year.

Group members say that the October death of Jeffny Pally, a UConn student from West Hartford, was a natural outcome of the growing

problem. The 19-year-old UConn student's blood alcohol level was three times the legal definition of intoxication when she left a party at the off-campus house that a UConn fraternity rented, police say. She passed out in front of the garage doors of the campus fire station, where she was killed when run over by an emergency vehicle leaving the garage to respond to a call.

Six UConn students who are members of the Kappa Sigma fraternity, which hosted that party, were arrested last month on alcohol-related charges in connection with Pally's death.

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Mansfield Neighborhood Preservation Group

Photographs taken by members of the Mansfield Neighborhood Preservation Group show, from left to right, a group of students holding an alcohol drinking-game party on the front lawn of a rented, single-family house in a Mansfield residential neighborhood; cars violating the town's parking code at a single-family house rented by students; and trash left curbside at another single-family house rented by students.



# Residents: UConn hasn't built enough dorms to handle enrollment

■ UCONN  
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"Fraternity parties off campus are a big problem," says Rebecca Shafer, the group's co-founder. "It was just a matter of time before that happened, and it will happen again."

The problem is severe enough that Mansfield's town manager, Matthew Hart, says he's added police staff to his 2017-18 budget proposal.

"We want to deal with this problem before it spirals out of control," he says.

The well-organized and vocal group notes that another student was seriously injured last March when he was hit by a car at 2 a.m. while kneeling on Route 195 after a frat party at an off-campus house.

And police broke up a loud mob of about 100 students carousing in December at a rented house on Echo Road.

Revelers were seen urinating in the street and on the lawn, throwing large rocks to break the ice on a nearby neighborhood skating-pond, and strewing trash throughout the wooded lots.

It's a growing trend, residents say, that's replaced Spring Weekend — the annual three-day event notorious during the 1990s for drunken riots, bonfires, vandalized cars, and hundreds of arrests each year, mostly at the off-campus Carriage House and Celeron apartments.

University officials and state police clamped down, however, and began providing a restrained celebration on campus in recent years.

But Mansfield neighbors say the problem has merely moved to their back yards, complaining that the university hasn't built enough new dorms to accommodate their booming enrollment.

## Enrollment outstrips dorm growth

According to an analysis conducted by the neighborhood group, UConn has 13,481 undergraduate and graduate students living off campus, accounting for 54.9 percent of the town's population of 24,588.

While a large city can easily absorb that many students in its neighborhoods, study author and Mansfield resident Bill Roe says his "cow patch town" is too rural for such an integration.

The University of Washington in Seattle has 37,422 students living off campus, but that's just 5.6 percent of the city's population of 662,400, he says, adding that those off-campus students likely have relatively little impact on traffic, affordable housing, available natural resources, or emergency services.

While UConn recently built new dorms, others were torn down. That's left a net total gain of only 246 new beds at a time when enrollment has increased by 45 percent in the last 20 years, the neighborhood group says.

University officials say the neighborhood group's figures are overly inflated.

They peg the number of undergraduate and graduate students living off campus in Mansfield during the current academic year at 5,400, with almost 4,400 of them in apartment buildings.

"Unless they get the students under control, there's going to be another tragedy. The problem is you have students walking down the middle of the street."

Elizabeth Cowles  
Former Mansfield resident

"The roughly 24,600 figure cited by the group as Mansfield's population includes the approximately 12,700 students who live on campus in UConn residence halls," university spokeswoman Stephanie Reitz says, adding that Mansfield's U.S. Census population count includes the Storrs area.

According to UConn's numbers, there are about 800 people — presumably a blend of students and non-students — living in the Mansfield-Storrs neighborhoods near campus, Reitz says.

As for on-campus housing, the amount "has grown substantially in the past few decades," Reitz says, noting that the 246 new beds are the net addition of the Next Gen Hall, minus the loss of Connecticut Commons.

The university lists its total student enrollment at the main campus for fall 2016 at 19,324, according to its website.

It now has 12,700 on-campus beds, an increase of about 4,680 since fall 1998 when there were just over 8,000, Reitz states.

There has also been an increase in on-campus housing in recent years with the purchase of the Nathan Hale Inn and its partial use as a dorm; the transitioning of many previous double-occupancy dorm rooms to triple occupancy; and converting many social and study lounges to residential rooms, she adds.

In addition, some of the largest new off-campus private housing options are situated away from residential neighborhoods, such as The Oaks on the Square in the Storrs Center development along Route 195, Reitz says.

"About 71 percent of UConn's full-time undergraduate student body lives on campus, notably higher than the average for public four-year universities," she says, citing a report from U.S. News and World Report showing the university as No. 2 in having the most students living in college-owned or affiliated housing.

But the same article also shows UConn ranked at 54 for the impact ratio of off-campus student population relative to the community population, the neighborhood



Mansfield Neighborhood Preservation Group

A large party two years ago at 1096 Storrs Road which, according to the Mansfield neighborhood group, had been rented by the fraternity Sigma Alpha Epsilon. The party shut down Route 195 until state police broke up the party, neighbors say, but no nuisance violation was ever issued because no one admitted to living there. Town Manager Matthew Hart says that in these instances, the best that can be done for now is to disperse the crowd and hope everyone gets home safely. The town, meanwhile, is looking to revamp its rental property codes and hire a full-time police officer to address the problem.

group says.

More than 460 single-family homes in Mansfield have been converted to rentals in recent years, Shafer says, affecting every neighborhood in town, even those farthest from campus.

Elizabeth Cowles, a biology professor at Eastern Connecticut State University, sold her Mansfield single-family home in June, saying she couldn't take the aggravation any more.

She raised two daughters in the house on Meadowood Road, where many of the homes were originally built for UConn faculty. In the last 10 years, though, the neighborhood has slowly rolled over to rental units housing college students, she says.

Cowles says that she constantly ran a white-noise machine of crashing waves or rain to block out the blare of late-night music and din of parties.

After her younger daughter graduated high school in 2010, the family pulled up stakes and moved to East Windsor.

"Unless they get the students under control, there's going to be another tragedy," she says. "The problem is you have drunk students walking down the middle of the street.

"You're constantly being knocked out of bed by someone's large radio, or picking up beer cans, or wondering if the car coming towards you is being operated by a drunk driver," she adds.

Mansfield, which relies on resident state troopers for public safety, isn't equipped to deal with that, Cowles says.

## Town responds

To address the problem, Mansfield's Town Council has created a subcommittee charged with reviewing existing rental regulations and fines.

And in September, the town's Planning and Zoning Commission imposed a 9-month moratorium on approving multifamily residential facilities so it can revise building codes to better accommodate future development, including student

housing.

Hart, the town manager, applauds the neighborhood groups' efforts and says he's included a full-time police officer in his proposed 2017-18 budget for community policing.

"It's warranted," Hart says. The town's eight resident troopers, along with backup from the Troop C state police barracks in Tolland and the university's own police force, "allows us to meet the majority of policing needs," he adds.

"But if we want to be more proactive in the neighborhoods, we need more," Hart says.

Updated zoning and code regulations are tools that will only go so far, he says, adding that the problem of student parties spreading from the Carriage House and Celeron apartments over to single-family homes rented by students has been a growing concern in recent years.

Hart says that when parties number 100 or more students, there's little anyone can do.

"At that point, we're dealing with dispersing and hoping they get home safely," he says.

## Students face repercussions

Reitz says it's worth noting that of Mansfield's known 420 single-family rental properties, only 7 percent, or about two-dozen, have been identified as "problematic due to behavior involving students."

"If the university is notified, the issues are dealt with swiftly," the spokeswoman adds.

UConn works closely with students, town leaders, apartment complex managers, landlords, state police, and others "to ensure that our students know the expectations that come with the opportunity to live more independently off campus," Reitz says.

Students' misbehavior away from campus is dealt with the same as if it had occurred on campus, she added — including possible expulsion.

While that may be true, Hart says, "the problem is it just takes a handful to really create some problems."